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SUBJECT: MEPI REACTION: AMMAN

1. SUMMARY: THE MEPI AND SECRETARY POWELL'S SPEECH HAVE DOMINATED JORDANIAN EDITORIAL PAGES IN RECENT DAYS, WITH REACTION BEST DESCRIBED AS COMPLEX: SOME WRITERS HAVE WELCOMED THE INITIATIVE, EXPRESSING A KIND OF RELIEF AT THE ACCURATE IDENTIFICATION OF CORE DEFICIENCIES PLAGUING ARAB SOCIETIES (IF MIXED WITH AN ADMITTED DEGREE OF "SHAME" THAT IT WAS THE U.S. THAT DID SO AND SUSPICION OF TRUE U.S. MOTIVES), WHILE OTHERS HAVE REJECTED THE INITIATIVE AS AN APPARENT U.S. PALLIATIVE MEANT TO DISTRACT ARABS FROM THE REAL DANGERS IN THEIR MIDST: UNLIMITED US SUPPORT FOR ISRAEL AND THREATS AGAINST IRAQ. OTHER COMMENTATORS HAVE MADE THE POINT THAT THE INITIATIVE TEMPTS GREAT DANGER: THAT BY ENCOURAGING GREATER DEMOCRACY IN THE REGION AT A TIME WHEN ISLAMIST MOVEMENTS ARE VIEWED AS THE BEST ORGANIZED POLITICAL ELEMENTS IN MANY ARAB SOCIETIES (AND FEEDING OFF WIDESPREAD OPPOSITION TO US POLICIES TO FURTHER ENHANCE THEIR POPULAR APPEAL), THE RESULT CAN ONLY BE FURTHER RADICALIZATION AND INSTABILITY HERE. PRIVATELY, SOME IN THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY HAVE EXPRESSED DISAPPOINTMENT THAT SPECIAL MENTION OF JORDAN'S ONGOING ECONOMIC REFORM EFFORTS WERE NOT HIGHLIGHTED MORE IN THE SECRETARY'S SPEECH. OVERALL, THE ANNOUNCEMENT HAS ALREADY HAD THE POSITIVE EFFECT OF STIMULATING AN IMPORTANT DEBATE ON DEMOCRATIZATION AND REFORM, AS WITNESSED FIRST-HAND WHEN PAO AND USAID MISSION DIRECTOR PRE-BRIEFED INFLUENTIAL JORDANIAN COLUMNISTS PRIOR TO THE SPEECH. END SUMMARY.

2. SECRETARY POWELL'S MEPI SPEECH RECEIVED FRONT-PAGE COVERAGE IN ALL JORDANIAN DAILIES ON FRIDAY, 12/13, AND HAS BEEN THE DOMINANT ISSUE IN THE EDITORIAL PAGES SINCE. POST IS REPORTING SEPARATELY, IN STANDARD "MEDIA REACTION" FORMAT, SYNOPSES OF INDIVIDUAL OP-ED COLUMNS REGARDING THE MEPI ANNOUNCEMENT; THIS CABLE ATTEMPTS TO CRYSTALLIZE SOME OF THE PRINCIPAL COMMENTARY WE HAVE SEEN IN JORDAN ON THE ISSUE.

3. PA AMMAN ROLLED OUT THE MEPI LOCALLY WITH A PRE-BRIEFING FOR INFLUENTIAL JORDANIAN COLUMNISTS, CONDUCTED DECEMBER 12 BY THE PAO AND USAID MISSION DIRECTOR. THIS SESSION REVEALED THE MIXED VIEWS BORNE OUT IN SUBSEQUENT PUBLISHED COMMENTARY ON THE SPEECH. IN GENERAL, THE COLUMNISTS WE BRIEFED WERE SUPPORTIVE OF US EFFORTS TO ENCOURAGE POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN THE REGION, BUT EXPRESSED SKEPTICISM ABOUT HOW SUCH EFFORTS WOULD BE VIEWED GIVEN WIDESPREAD DISAGREEMENT WITH US POLICY TOWARD THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT AND IRAQ. THE US POSITION ON THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN DISPUTE WAS THE "MAGIC KEY" TO GAINING ACCEPTANCE FOR OTHER US INITIATIVES IN THE REGION, ONE COLUMNIST SAID -- A FAILURE TO MAKE CHANGES ON THAT ISSUE WOULD MAKE INSIGNIFICANT THE IMPACT OF THE MEPI ON BROADER US EFFORTS TO IMPROVE ITS IMAGE IN THE REGION. THIS AUDIENCE ALSO FOCUSED ON THE PURPORTED PARADOX WHEREBY THE US WOULD ENCOURAGE INCREASED POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN COUNTRIES WHERE IT MAINTAINS FRIENDLY RELATIONS WITH GOVERNMENTS PERCEIVED AS HOSTILE TO INCREASED POLITICAL OPENNESS.

FEARS OF SUCCESS: GAINS BY ISLAMISTS

4. THE POSSIBILITY THAT THE MEPI MIGHT LEAD TO FURTHER POLITICAL GAINS BY ISLAMISTS TOUCHED OFF A LIVELY DISCUSSION IN OUR MEETING WITH COLUMNISTS. AS THE BEST ORGANIZED AND MOST RESPECTED (AMONG THE MASSES) POLITICAL MOVEMENTS AT PRESENT, ISLAMIST PARTIES WOULD BE THE PRINCIPAL BENEFICIARIES OF REAL STEPS TOWARD DEMOCRACY, SEVERAL OF THEM ARGUED. IN ADDITION, "UNBALANCED" US POLICIES TOWARDS THE PALESTINIANS AND IRAQ ARE ONLY FUELING THIS TENDENCY AND BOOSTING THE CHANCES OF ISLAMIST TAKE-OVERS. "WAS AMERICA AWARE OF THIS DANGER BEFORE IT DECIDED TO LAUNCH THE INITIATIVE?", ONE OF OUR GUESTS ASKED. ANOTHER, A SELF-DESCRIBED "LIBERAL", SAID THAT THE REGION WAS IN DESPERATE NEED OF MORE DEMOCRACY, BUT HE FEARED THAT AMERICA'S NATURAL ALLIES IN THIS EFFORT (E.G., OTHER LIBERALS) WOULD SHY AWAY FROM EMBRACING THE INITIATIVE OUT OF DEEP-SEEDED DISAPPOINTMENT WITH OTHER U.S. POLICIES IN THE REGION AND SUSPICIONS ABOUT TRUE U.S. MOTIVES. THIS SAME WRITER SAID IN A COLUMN 12/14 IN THE ARABIC DAILY AL ARAB AL YAMM: "WE WELCOME THIS POSITIVE AND CONSTRUCTIVE POSITION BECAUSE WE VALUE DEMOCRACY AND YEARN TO BE ABLE TO ENJOY IT. WE CHALLENGE THE AMERICAN ADMINISTRATION TO IMPLEMENT THIS INITIATIVE AS A PACKAGE, AND WE SHALL ASSUME THAT POWELL'S

WORDS SPRING FROM REAL CONVICTION. BUT WE MUST REPEAT TO THE U.S. ADMINISTRATION FOR THE THOUSANDTH TIME THAT THE KEY TO GAINING THE CONFIDENCE OF THE ARAB PEOPLES IS THROUGH SOLVING THE PALESTINAIN PROBLEM."

REJECTIONISTS AND THE OPPOSITE VIEW

16. THE INITIATIVE HAS ALSO MET WITH OUTRIGHT REJECTION BY CERTAIN QUARTERS. IN OUR BRIEFING OF COLUMNISTS, ONE WRITER SAID THAT "ANY NEW US ASSISTANCE ASSOCIATED WITH THIS INITIATIVE WILL AMOUNT TO NOTHING NEXT TO THE DESTRUCTION YOU WILL SOON UNLEASH ON IRAQ." THIS SAME WRITER CLAIMED AN INCONSISTENCY IN THE INITIATIVE'S CALL FOR GREATER POLITICAL PARTICIPATION, "WHILE THE US WORKS TO DRAW UP ITS OWN TERMS FOR SUCCESS" IN THE UPCOMING PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY ELECTIONS. FOR ITS PART, THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD-AFFILIATED JORDANIAN "ISLAMIC ACTION FRONT" (IAF) ISSUED A STATEMENT DECEMBER 16 THAT READ, IN PART: "REAL PARTNERSHIP WILL EMERGE ONLY WHEN ALL U.S. FORCES LEAVE OUR COUNTRIES AND WHEN THE UNITED STATES STOPS THREATENING US AND INCITING AGAINST US AND WHEN IT STOPS SUPPORTING OUR ENEMIES AND PROVIDING THEM WITH PROTECTION. WE WANT DEMOCRACY AS A NATIONAL CHOICE, NOT AS A U.S. RECIPE."

17. ON THE OTHER HAND, WE HAVE HEARD PRIVATELY FROM BUSINESS AND EVEN SOME GOVERNMENT CONTACTS SOME DISAPPOINTMENT THAT JORDAN'S OWN ECONOMIC REFORM EFFORTS WERE NOT HIGHLIGHTED MORE SIGNIFICANTLY IN THE SECRETARY'S SPEECH AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE KIND OF DIFFICULT, BUT ULTIMATELY REWARDING, STEPS REQUIRED TO BREAK LOOSE THE ECONOMIES OF THE REGION. A DAY PRIOR TO THE SPEECH, KING ABDULLAH OFFERED STRONG PRAISE FOR MEPI IN REMARKS ADDRESSED VIA DIGITAL VIDEO CONFERENCE TO BUSINESS PEOPLE AND INVESTORS IN JORDAN, WASHINGTON AND FIVE ARAB CAPITALS IN AN EVENT RELATED TO THE ONE-YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF THE U.S.- JORDAN FREE TRADE AGREEMENT. THE JORDANIAN BUSINESS COMMUNITY IS PROUD OF THE ECONOMIC GROWTH JORDAN HAS MANAGED TO ACHIEVE IN THE YEAR SINCE THE ENTRY-INTO-FORCE OF THE FTA, ESPECIALLY AS OTHER ECONOMIES IN THE REGION HAVE CONTINUED TO SLIDE.

AN OPENING OF THE DEBATE

18. AMONG THE MORE POSITIVE REACTIONS WE HAVE SEEN IS A TREND AMONG A NUMBER OF PROGRESSIVE AND INFLUENTIAL OPINION WRITERS (AND OTHER PA CONTACTS) WHO HAVE WELCOMED THE OPPORTUNITY TO GET THESE ISSUES ON THE TABLE AND INTO THE PUBLIC DEBATE. URAIB RINTAWI, A PROMINENT DAILY COLUMNIST WROTE IN AL-DUSTOOR 12/14: "THE NEED FOR POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, ADMINISITRATIVE AND FISCAL REFORM IN THE ARAB WORLD IS REAL, EVEN IF IT IS THE AMERICANS THAT TELL US ABOUT IT. WE SHOULD NOT SUSPEND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS WAITING FOR A SOLUTION TO THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT." SIMILARLY, IN A PIECE ON 12/16 IN SEMI-OFFICIAL AL-RAI, COLUMNIST JAMAL AL-TAHAT SAID: "THE VALUE OF THE INITIATIVE DOES NOT LIE IN THE FUNDS ALLOCATED TO IT, BUT IN THE IDEA ON WHICH IT IS BASED. BUT IT IS ALSO AN EXPRESSION OF A TOTAL ARAB FAILURE, TO THE POINT WHERE IT SEEMS THE U.S. IS SIDING WITH THE ARABS AGAINST THEIR OWN IGNORANCE." AT A PA-ORGANIZED DISCUSSION PROGRAM FOR JORDANIAN STUDENTS ON "THE ROLE OF THINK TANKS IN FORMULATING U.S. FOREIGN POLICY" AT THE EMBASSY ON 12/16, NUMEROUS PARTICIPANTS WERE AWARE OF THE MEPI AND EXPRESSED INTEREST IN HOW IT MIGHT ADVANCE, FOR INSTANCE, OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN JORDAN. IN SUM, U.S. ENCOURAGEMENT OF ARAB REFORM STRUCK A LOUD CHORD IN JORDAN, EVEN IF DISTRUST OF U.S. OBJECTIVES IN THE REGION IS ALSO AN ISSUE IN THE DEBATE WE HAVE SPARKED.
GNEHM